

“Love Does No Wrong to a Neighbor”

Valley Presbyterian Church – September 6, 2020

14th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 119:33-40

Rev. John Wahl

Romans 13:8-14

Yesterday, the 146th running of the Kentucky Derby took place on a beautiful, but eerily quiet, early fall evening in Louisville, Kentucky – my hometown. The Derby – and the myriad of other festivities that normally surround the race – ooze with the traditions of Southern hospitality. All of the parties and pageantry, the graceful horses and colorful hats, are symbols of a desire to offer your guests – whether friend, neighbor, or stranger – the very finest that the city and state has to offer. It was bittersweet to watch an empty Churchill Downs, hosting the Run for the Roses not on the first Saturday of May, but four months later than normal, and how – even though we want things to be the same – this year they are so different.

Following a spring and a summer like no other, Labor Day Weekend of this year 2020 now ushers in a fall in which about the only thing certain is its utter uncertainty. Many of these questions revolve around the best and safest way to teach our children; the answers involving a whole range of adjustments to schedules, activities, and routines for schools: whether in-person, on-line, or hybrid. Nevertheless, fall has come, a new school year has begun, and so – in many homes – alarm clocks that were kept silent for months are now being set for early wake-ups again.

Most of our phones these days come with dozens of different alarm options. There are low-key ring tones with names like *Serene Morning*, *Rainy Day*, and *Blowing Dandelion Seeds*. There are different settings, for those days when you have early appointments to make or buses to catch, like *Basic Bell* and *Car Lock*. Or, maybe, you are like me, and after living fifteen years with a son who rarely sleeps beyond daybreak, you have developed an internal alarm that rarely, if ever, allows you to sleep in.

In today’s passage, Paul is adamant that the Roman church needs to wake from sleep. And so, as readers of this text, we are exhorted to wake up with them. Paul defines sleep as the habits and relationships of night-time; fueled by

selfishness, self-indulgence, and the lack of discipline. A laid-back ring tone like *Blowing Dandelion Seeds* is inadequate for the importance of this wake-up call. For Paul, the urgency comes from the short period of time between Christ's first coming and his expected second coming. Jesus will come again to establish God's kingdom and his rule. Paul seems to anticipate this event will be happening soon.

When centuries have passed and this second coming still has not occurred, it is easy to lose urgency. But the truth remains for us that our lives on earth are short and we have a limited time to serve Christ in this world. Jesus' sufferings on the cross and resurrection from the dead serve as a wake-up call to us to notice the trials and sufferings of others and to accept that love has the highest claim on our lives; now and always: love for God and love of neighbor.¹

Why doesn't Paul mention here what Jesus calls the first commandment – loving God with heart, soul, mind, and strength? Maybe because he sees the two commandments so closely intertwined. If we truly love our neighbors as ourselves, we are simultaneously loving God.

When Paul says, “owe no one anything except to love one another,” it may be important to recognize what obligations would have been present in first-century Roman culture. They owed honor and allegiance to the emperor; and they owed money, possessions and honor to their benefactors. Peasants owed a portion of their crops to landowners. Slaves owed service to their masters; wives owed submission to their husbands, and so on. Thus, when Paul urges his audience to owe nothing except love, he is rearranging their expectations. If obligation was typically related to position and the upholding of status and authority, Paul's exhorting them to owe nothing except love forces some rethinking.

Paul does not say, *in addition to cultural norms, love one another*; he says owe nothing; live differently; adopt a new normal; seek a transformation of thought and action. The list of behaviors that Paul describes here in the 13th verse reads much like a *People* magazine from first century Rome. The elite of that society were famous for excessive eating and adultery, for their vanity and petty arguments. Paul urges them instead to live honorably; as if the light of the new day is already shining; not as if the cloak of darkness still envelops.

Paul says, “the night is far gone, the day is near.” We understand this way of thinking from political rhetoric and the language of a *new day dawning* that has become cliché in the speeches of candidates. It is shorthand for that more

¹ Alyce McKenzie, “The Cross as our Ringtone” from *Patheos.com*

prosperous, peaceful time that politicians imagine when the policies they promote replace those of their opponents; when we become – in accordance with their promised plans – the more perfect union that the founders imagined.

The lateness of time, the daylight being near, gives reason for acting as if the day were not just dawning but already here. Notice that the appeal is not that we should look busy and therefore impress Jesus with our diligence and wins his favor. Paul does not use guilt or fear to motivate, but rather joy and hope. Paul says that salvation, and not condemnation, is nearer to us than when we became believers. The coming day is not a threat, but a gift. We are on the cusp of an entirely new age. To anticipate it is to be already changed by it.²

The world that we live in today sometimes seems dark; like the light of day is far away. And yet, amid the prevalent suffering and all-too-pervasive scandals, the clashes on city streets and confrontations of seemingly competing worldviews, there is a sense that, as a society, we might finally be waking up. The alarms of racial injustice, environmental disruption, and economic inequity are beeping all around us and they are calling us transform our ways of thinking and acting. As much as we might love to hold on to our traditions, and for things to go back to what we thought was normal, daylight may be breaking around us.

In a conversation with a lawyer and his parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus broadened the definition of neighbor and gave us a picture of love as the fulfilling of the law. Following the rules and refraining from doing wrong were a good start, Jesus says, but the challenge was to go even further; to commit entirely, to really wake up. Here, Paul echoes the same themes as he counsels the Christians in Rome on how they can bear witness to the lordship of Christ, even as they live out their lives in the empire's capital city; putting on the armor of light as a public display of hope; living lives characterized by loving one's neighbor as oneself and offering testimony to an alternative future.

Thus, the future is not a binary choice between keeping your head down and quietly fulfilling your obligations on one hand; or carousing and quarreling on the other. For those who are clothed with Christ, the future is instead characterized by seeing the "other" as neighbor and seeking the best for them. Rabbi Hillel famously summarized the Torah, the Jewish law, in a kind of *negative golden rule*, saying, "what is hateful to yourself, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah. The rest is explanation."³ The idea is that when we can look at another

² Mary Hinkle Shore from *WorkingPreacher.com*

³ As quoted by Alan Brehm in "Charity Never Fails"

person with true compassion – even if that person is of a different race or status, political party or religious tradition – we are not going to do that person harm. For, if it is truly compassion that we feel, we will seek their good as far as it is possible for us to do so.

Sisters and brothers, the Table around which Jesus calls us to gather has room for all – and therefore room even for us. Let us give thanks for the God who calls us to live in the light, even if the daybreak has not yet fully arrived. Amen.